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### Thomas Cromwell: A Life (book review)

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creation myth that celebrated New England and ignored Jamestown. Nineteenth-century Americans, like Charles Adams and Nathaniel Hawthorne, found predestination and holy society repugnant, associating American Puritanism with intolerance and priggishness. Even Perry Miller, one of the most notable scholars of Puritanism, found New England Puritans the founders of the distasteful striving “culture of Main Street.” American evangelicals, Halls says, have wandered far from their Puritan roots. He ends this good book claiming that historians have restored a proper understanding of this enormously important group if we would only look. To read this book is to gain a much better sense of who they were and why they are so important.

Norman Jones

Utah State University

*Thomas Cromwell: A Life.* Diarmaid MacCulloch. London, Great Britain: Allen Lane, 2018, Pp. 728. £30.00.)

Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Thomas Cromwell: A Life* is a wonderfully wrought and painstakingly researched epic of a conflicted man. That is a person like each of us. Yet more than anyone in England since his day, Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540) did more to shape the form of the Anglo-American sovereign state. That he did so by manipulating the levers of administrative bureaucracy and parliamentary power serves to mark his place in modernity. That his social standing and personal wealth grew substantially through his service is typical of all ages. Born in Putney, now part of greater London, Cromwell grew up as more than a son of a “shearman” as a peevish Henry VIII described him some months after Cromwell's execution. Cromwell's yeoman father operated a commercial brewery and owned several brew houses. The bright Thomas left home at fifteen and traveled the Continent. He became fluent in Italian and French and could write in Latin and read Greek. He returned to England only around 1515 and took up the practice of law on behalf of valuable clients such as the wealthy Guild of Our Lady of Boston, which was the primary purveyor of indulgences in England. He was also reading Erasmus.

Having moved up to the rank of gentleman, and even a seat in Parliament in 1523, Cromwell entered the service of Cardinal Wolsey in 1524 as the prelate's power was rising toward its zenith. Wolsey was archbishop of York, which gave him considerable influence in the English Church, as well as papal legate, a position that became untenable as the king's pressure for an annulment from his marriage to Katherine of Aragon increased, and Pope Clement VII steadfastly refused to decide. Rather than wait till the end of the fall of his first master, Cromwell entered the royal service in 1530, and once ensconced, Cromwell did nothing if not move up, and neatly sidestepped untoward turns of events, including the final disgrace of Wolsey.

In his years of public life, Thomas Cromwell by turns wavered between closeted and open evangelicalism (as Protestantism was known in early sixteenth-century England). He served Wolsey and then the unpredictable and irascible Henry VIII. MacCulloch describes with detail how Cromwell's commitments became ever-more evangelical in the period 1525-1528 as the Guild of Boston remarkably had become the *entrepôt* for Protestant texts from the Continent. During this period, Cromwell worked with Lollards and placed evangelicals in a new college at Oxford that Cardinal Wolsey was founding. He also worked a fluid political system for his own financial benefit.

While serving in royal administration throughout the next decade, Cromwell sought to reform England's ecclesiastical life in an ever-more evangelical direction, often with the support of a not-quite-comprehending king. The synthesis of Cromwell's political and ecclesiastical agenda culminated with Henry's betrothal to Protestant Anne of Cleves, intended to cement England's relations with the Schmalkaldic League. The collapse of Cromwell's agenda—and ultimately his life—came with the subsequently unconsummated marriage of the royal couple.

Cromwell's leading role in engineering the dissolution of England's monasteries is an example of how MacCulloch entwines a fine-grained mosaic of self-indulgent monastic orders, Cromwell's mastery of the techniques of administration and legislation, and the avarice of the king. Piecemeal litigation would be inadequate to suppress remaining outposts of papal loyalists.

Beginning with the king's fear of subversion and Cromwell's evangelical commitments, MacCulloch tells a step-by-step narrative of the greatest land grab in England since 1066. Invoking the long-standing doctrine of *cy prés* ("as near as possible," the doctrine invoked by Courts of Chancery by which property is taken from a discredited charitable trust and given to another better to fulfill the original charitable purpose,) in 1534-1535 Cromwell orchestrated the process of visitation, taking stock of the nearly all of England's religious houses and secular cathedrals, hospitals, and colleges. Cromwell was an apt choice for this project because he had personal experience dissolving a small number of monasteries the previous decade at the behest of Cardinal Wolsey (to fund the college mentioned above).

The visitations revealed a trove of assets and at least a few sexual irregularities (and rumors of more). Armed with this information, in 1536, Cromwell engineered legislation authorizing the dissolution of lesser (and generally foreign based) monasteries, which saw their assets transferred to other charitable entities like colleges. Three years later, however, it was the king and Parliament, not Cromwell, that created a more far-reaching program of dissolution, which enriched the royal coffers. Thus, was the process of dissolution made possible through a legislatively authorized bureaucratic process in which Cromwell enjoyed a crucial role. Rightly did Harold Berman characterize the English Reformation as a revolution.

An even longer summary would not do justice to MacCulloch's voluminous text. A magisterial work many years in the making, *Thomas Cromwell* will not be superseded unless someone discovers the missing "outbox" of Cromwell's voluminous correspondence. To recreate the man, MacCulloch has exhaustively combed all existing (and newly uncovered) data about Cromwell and correlated multiple strands of information across personal, geographical, genealogical, literary, meteorological, and relational axes. MacCulloch weaves a dense fabric that leads the reader to understand the man and his choices. Not necessarily to consent to either, for MacCulloch is no hagiographer, but to admit a fair measure of empathy for his subject.

Interpretations of the meaning of Cromwell's life may differ. Even so, they must acquit themselves mightily to overcome MacCulloch's intricately argued conclusion that Cromwell's evangelical religion was the single most important impetus to his political actions. MacCulloch succeeds in demythologizing Cromwell the man but not at the cost of turning him into a cipher of material forces or a tool for religious propaganda.

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*Ordinary Saints: Women, Work, and Faith in Newfoundland.* By Bonnie Morgan. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, Pp. xxiv, 332. \$37.95.)

By studying women's roles and church work in three Newfoundland communities, Bonnie Morgan has expanded our understanding of living one's faith. Based on interviews, material artifacts, and the record books of Anglican women's parish organizations, *Ordinary Saints* documents that Newfoundland women in the first half of the twentieth century participated in a culture formed by religious faith and traditions that emphasized support and caring. The many duties that women had on the hard-scrabble farms and fishing communities created a culture that recognized and respected women's work. On Sundays, men and women took turns attending church, with men often staying home to cook Sunday dinner (from food the women readied the day before) and to watch younger children. In mixed-religion marriages, women often determined which church the family attended. By 1950, forms of paid labor were replacing direct exchange of goods and services with a cash economy. This had dramatic effects on women's lives.

Women determined what customs were followed in keeping Lent, celebrating religious holidays, decorating homes, and in births and burials. Midwives were often church group leaders, and sometimes baptized infants. Members of the women's organizations had their own rituals to celebrate milestone life events, gathering as a group to attend wakes and funerals. The first